Every Picture Tells A Story:
An Examination of Racialized Visuals and their Frame Effects

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
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INTRODUCTION

It is commonly believed that using pictures of "real people" humanizes an issue. The underlying assumption is that people will better relate to an issue when they can put a face to the problem. Advocates and philanthropists alike adorn their reports, briefs and collateral materials with the faces of the very groups they seek to benefit. But what effect does exposure to this sort of visual imagery have on the public? Does it lead them to higher levels of support for the issues and their attendant policies? Does it matter who is in the pictures and how they are depicted?

The purpose of this report is to provide some empirical answers to these questions. In general, we are concerned with how exposure to visual communications influences public policy preferences. More specifically, we want to know if the race of the people in the pictures matters for policy thinking. Given the salience of race in American culture, particularly as it relates to calls for social justice, it is important to know whether seeing a black person, as opposed to a white person — in an advocate's materials, for example — has differential effects on people's level of support for race-specific and non-race-specific policies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people believe these representations have a positive impact on the way people perceive the issue. To date, however, there has been little systematic research on the issue. Our study seeks to fill this void.

Our conceptual structure relies on the vast literature on framing to guide this examination. At its core, framing theory tells us that people look for cues from incoming communications that allow them to quickly and efficiently make sense of their world.[1] The evidence from the cognitive sciences suggests that cues embedded in the information stream activate the cognitive structures that are most readily available — or "top of mind" — for people and makes this information more accessible when people are required to make judgments.[2] Put differently, frames have the capacity to promote a particular definition, causal responsibility and solution to a problem or issue.[3] In short, how visual communications are framed is likely to have a measurable impact on people's policy preferences.[4]

In the summer of 2009, the FrameWorks Institute conducted an experimental study administered to a nationally representative sample of 2,400 registered voters. In accord with framing theory, we wanted to know more than whether the simple presence of race in the picture mattered, but also whether the manner of presentation — portrait or group shot, for example — made a difference for public opinion. To this end, we designed the study so that people were randomly assigned to experimental conditions that featured various visual representations of blacks and whites — either as a mother with her child; or, as a group of people working in a community garden. Our test was to see if exposure to racial content in visual communications had a measurable impact on people's support for two quite different policy areas — minority economic development and child and youth policies.

As it stands, our findings square quite nicely with a consistent finding in the research literature on frame effects: The impact of visual cues is moderated by people's prior beliefs. In other words, how people use this new information in policy thinking is a function of their predispositions along racial, party and gender lines. Pictures are not merely passive illustrations, but rather tell a story; this research shows that the story told by the photos in these experiments is one that connects powerfully to people's stored preconceptions. This core finding has significant implications for how racialized visuals are used in communications. In the main, our results speak volumes to the need for communications specialists to pay close attention to the framing choreography of messages.

The remainder of the report proceeds as follows: We begin with a brief review of the framing literature as it pertains to visual communications; we then turn to the issue of visual framing of race in public communications; this is followed by a summary of our specific research questions; the next section covers the research design and data measurement; the research findings appear in the proceeding section; and the report ends with a discussion of the implications for communicating social issues.

FRAMING, RACE AND VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

People have a network of beliefs and attitudes that are often called "schemas" or, as we prefer, "cultural models."[5] Put differently, life experiences make people "veterans of perception."[6] These models are structures of cognition that store and organize information about how the world works. They become, in effect, "subjective stories" that give meaning to people's social contexts. For instance, when presented with a social or political issue, people use their cultural models to guide and influence how they evaluate the issue. Thus, for example, American men have cultural models for understanding an issue like gender equality that contain various characteristics about women that derive from long-held stereotypes (e.g., women are too emotional to be leaders) or, in a different vein, from more recent events (e.g., the election and appointment of women to high-profile public posts like the Supreme Court and Secretary of State shows what women can achieve on a level playing field). In either case, cultural models will come into play when men are asked to evaluate a political or policy issue that has a gender component (e.g., abortion).

On the other hand, "frame" refers to a central organizing principle or narrative structure in communications that serves to activate these cultural models in such a way as to identify how people should understand the issue.[7] That is, frames in public narratives have the power to attribute responsibility by triggering a cultural model that clarifies who is responsible for the problem and who is responsible for its resolution.[8] As Ryan (1991) has argued, "Every frame defines the issue, explains who is responsible, and suggests potential solutions. All of these are conveyed by images, stereotypes, or anecdotes" (59).[9] The research literature highlights two

types of issue frames — episodic and thematic. Episodic frames are characterized by discrete events, occurring at particular times and places involving specific actions or people. Episodic frames have been shown to activate cultural models that assign responsibility to individuals. Thematic issue frames focus on the broader context in which the event occurs; as such, they are more ecological in nature. Thematic frames have been shown to activate cultural models that establish societal responsibility. As Gitlin (1980) observes, "[F]rames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters." (6)[10]

A good example of issue framing comes from the scholarship of Martin Gilens at Princeton University. Gilens conducted a series of powerful studies about how poverty became connected to race in American culture.[11] His core finding is that media depictions about the welfare state of the 1960s (and beyond) routinely featured blacks in the role of the undeserving poor. This was in sharp contrast to the pre-1960s coverage of poverty that framed it as an affliction of deserving whites dislocated from the American economy by the depression and the World Wars. Not surprisingly, the neo-conservative movement (beginning with Barry Goldwater) picked up on this and utilized it as a central narrative in its attack on government intervention in American life. The point is that poverty took on a "narrative structure" that activated cultural models about black dysfunction and effectively assigned responsibility to individuals and specific communities or groups, not to society as a whole.

This example leads us into the salience of race in America. There is little doubt that the blush is off the rose regarding the election of Barack Obama as the first American president of African descent. Racial antagonisms and cleavages have reemerged in the wake of President Obama's actions regarding a range of governmental actions (e.g., the bailout of the financial market, the government takeover of the U.S. auto industry, the war in Afghanistan and the debate over health care reform, to name a few). To be sure, some of the rhetoric is an ideological reaction to the policies of a moderate-liberal Democrat, but it is also clear that underlying racial resentment and animus still haunt American society.

Over the last few years, FrameWorks has been engaged in a study of how Americans think about race. In many ways, what we have been trying to do is map the dominant cultural models that people use to make sense of all things racial and to understand how they are activated, reinforced and contested by current public discourse. Our primary finding is the existence of a strong and widely held cultural model about race that comprises three parts:[12]

1. The race problem has been essentially eradicated by statute, policy, and law;
2. While racial inequality persists, it is the result of minorities generally, and blacks in particular, failing to live up to the standards of individual responsibility and self-makingness;

3. Whites and nonwhites — and whites and blacks especially — lead fundamentally different lives whose outcomes are determined by fundamentally different things.

Media frames that tell a story of minority pathologies — welfare queens, gang bangers, drug dealers and hustlers, routinely reinforce this model. In turn, these frames, whether explicit or implicit in public storytelling, have been shown to not only have a corrosive impact on whites' evaluations of minorities but also lead people to support a range of punitive public policies on such issues as crime, welfare and immigration.[13] In other words, when frames and cultural models concur, they have the power to define policy alternatives. For example, if individual minority offenders are the cause of crime, then the solution is to remove them from society. This logic, of course, fueled the massive prison buildup of the past two decades. In other words, the episodic portrayal of minority crime attributed responsibility for the problem to minority men; in turn, the articulated policy alternative was to "lock 'e up." Interestingly, many recent studies have called this policy agenda into question.[14]

It is against this backdrop that advocates, funders and other stakeholders have tried to figure out how to communicate about race in ways that will heighten support for a policy agenda that is usually described as "progressive." One of the common techniques of this work is to feature pictures of people of color in collateral materials, campaigns and on report covers. The prevailing wisdom is that this humanizes the issue and leads to greater issue support. This is particularly true if the images are perceived to be *positive* in nature (i.e., not stereotypical or pejorative). How does the audience perceive these images? Is it true that seeing a positive picture of minorities activates a chain of thinking that produces a positive policy response? How should we begin to think about this? The literature in the field of visual communications provides some clues.

There is a consensus among researchers that one advantage of text or verbal communications is that they contain an articulated and overt set of "syntactic devices" for generating hypotheses. Commonly, these devices allow the reader or listener to make causal connections between various parts of an issue. In FrameWorks parlance, these causal connections are known as "causal chains." According to Benjamin (2009), for example, "Causal chains usually contain the following three parts: an initial factor, a final consequence, and a mediating factor, which provides the explanation that links the two. Effective causal chains should be expressed as brief, powerful explanations of causation so that the reader understands the connection among the factors."[15]

Visual communications, on the other hand, lack such a device; thus, they "… are more reliant on the viewer's ability to make intuitive sense of implicit meanings on the basis of contextual or other cues." Put differently, the absence of an articulated causal chain in a frame cue means people are more apt to rely on their dominant cultural models. This means that framing effects can be attenuated by strong prior beliefs. Framing effects may also depend on the extent to which

the incoming communication is congruent or consistent with existing cognitive structures. From this perspective, information consistent with available cultural models is more easily encoded and categorized than inconsistent information.[16] In short, framing effects may depend on interactions with strong beliefs and/or the extent to which the information stream is symmetrical or asymmetrical.

Our study, then, is centered on a series of questions:

1. Does exposure to a positive visual presentation of blacks lead to higher levels of support for either race-based on non-race-based public policies?
2. Does it matter if the visual frame is episodic or thematic in nature?
3. Are strongly held prior beliefs — such as racial resentment, partisan identification, or attitudes associated with gender or race — moderating factors on support for public policy?
4. Is the story even more complicated? Does race condition the moderating effects of either party or gender?

In what follows, we provide answers to these questions.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Exposure to race-based photos (or photos where minority populations are depicted), even relatively positive or benign ones, did not increase public support for policies related to minority economic development or improving conditions for children and youth.

- Contrary to the conventional wisdom that exposure to "positive" pictures of blacks leads to higher levels of support for race-based policy, exposure to a photo that featured blacks lowered support for minority economic development. Surprisingly, exposure to a photo that shows whites also lowered support.

- Exposure to a white episodic photo (which consisted of a mother and child) was associated with a small but statistically significant decrease (3 points) in support for child and youth policies.

- Blacks and Hispanics exposed to a thematic photo featuring blacks were much more supportive of both minority economic development and child and youth policies than those who received no photo. Whites, on the other hand, were not significantly influenced by this photo.

- Exposure to the black thematic and white episodic photos significantly reduced support for minority economic development among Republicans and Independents, while it somewhat increased support among Democrats.

- Exposure to the black episodic and white thematic photos polarized people along party lines in roughly equal proportions with respect to minority economic development.

- Exposure to any of the photo treatments polarized policy support for child and youth policies across party lines.

- Overall, men exposed to these photos tended to have much stronger negative reactions to policy proposals than their counterparts in the control conditions. Women exhibited a similar pattern — they expressed a much stronger positive reaction to the policy proposals once exposed to the photos but their policy support moved in the opposite, more positive direction.

- White Democrats responded negatively to the black episodic photo in terms of policy support for minority economic development. While this is what we might expect (race trumps party), this was not a general pattern in these data. Exposure to the white thematic visual divides policy support across party and race. Black Republicans and Independents break from their traditional pattern and actually exhibit higher levels of policy support.

- Exposure to visual treatments polarized study participants along racial and party lines with respect to child and youth policies as well. Exposure to the black thematic photo polarized along party lines regardless of race, while exposure to the white episodic photo polarized on both party and race dimensions — white Republicans and Independents exhibited lower levels of policy support for child and youth policies whereas black and white Democrats, as well as black Republicans and Independents, displayed higher levels of policy support.

- We also found an interaction between existing levels of racial resentment and exposure to the visual treatments in terms of support for both child and youth policies, and minority economic development policies. Specifically, when exposed to any visual depiction, those high in racial resentment showed greater rejection for policy than the control; when exposed to any visual treatment, those with lower levels of racial resentment showed greater support policy, compared to the control.

- Attenuating effects go deeper to include intersections between race and party/gender — the basic pattern was for party to trump race in most instances and for race to trump gender.

RESEARCH METHODS

In July 2009, a nationally representative sample of 2,400 registered voters (weighted on the basis of gender, age, race, education and party identification) was drawn from a national online panel.[17] Four hundred respondents were assigned (at random) to the control group, while 250 were assigned to each of the eight experimental conditions. The median age of the sample was 40; 53 percent were women, 77 percent were white, 11 percent were black, and 7 percent were Hispanic. Respondents with a high school education represented 35 percent of the sample, those with some college 33 percent, and college graduates made up the remaining 32 percent. The sample included residents of all 50 states, with California, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania and Texas accounting for 32 percent of the sample. In terms of their political party affiliation, 38 percent identified as Democratic, 28 percent as Republican, and 35 percent as independent or non-partisan. In terms of partisan affiliation, 39 percent were Democrats, 31 percent Republican, and 30 percent non-partisan.

The theory of random assignment in evaluation research design suggests that any variation between the control and the treatment groups not stemming from exposure to the stimuli of the treatments should be negligible or nonexistent. To test this proposition more specifically in our research, we conducted a series of overall F-tests to determine if there were any systematic differences in the race, gender, education and party affiliation between the treatment and control groups. We found no differences significant at the $p > .10$ level. Even so, as an additional precaution against selection bias caused by prior disposition or other observed characteristics, we also used statistical methods to control for the impact of a discrete set of demographic and political variables available to us.

The Treatments

For this study, Frameworks developed a series of four race-based pictorial stimuli.[18] Subjects were either exposed to one of two photographs of a mother and her son (either a white pair or a black pair) or, alternatively, to one of two photographs of a group of four individuals (either an all white group or an all black group) working in a community garden. The first sets of stimuli (the mother and son photographs) were an attempt to represent an episodic portrait (mostly depicting the activities of an individual or an individual family), while the second set of stimuli represents a thematic treatment. These four levels of the treatment variable (white episodic, black episodic, white thematic, black thematic) (shown in Appendix A) were compared to a control group that received no stimuli at all. A framing effect is said to occur if the attitudes and preferences of those exposed to the frame differ significantly from those in the control condition. The assumption is that the information receives more weight because of its relative accessibility and thus its ready application.

Data Collection

Subjects were first asked to respond to a series of introductory questions where they rated their level of concern about a short series of unrelated political issues. To avoid contamination of testing effects, the series of political issues offered to subjects was rotated each time the survey was administered and was quite broad in subject matter. Immediately following this series of questions, subjects were assigned to either a treatment condition (and shown one of the four photos) or to the control condition (which received no stimulus). All subjects were then asked to answer questions related to their support for a range of political attitudes and policy alternatives (described below). Questions within each of these outcome areas were also rotated to mitigate against order effects.

Outcome Measures

The four treatment conditions and the control condition were compared based on differences in the subjects' level of support for a series of policy proposals. More specifically, policy support was measured by several index variables (referred to here as policy batteries) that tapped the approval/disapproval dichotomy of a series of policy proposals across several policy domains. Given that the focus of this report has to do with the impact of race in communications, it is obvious to expect that the stimuli will have an effect on the public's consideration of policy outcomes targeted to minority communities. On the other hand, we also wish to consider the extent to which racialized communication does (or does not) impact policy thinking on an issue that is ostensibly nonracial. To this end, we developed two dependent measures — one race-based (public support for minority economic development) and the other centered on support for a range of child and youth policies.[19]

To develop these two policy batteries, we first collected a list of public policy proposals in each of these domains. The lists of these policies can be found in Appendix B. To prepare these batteries for our analysis, we first pre-tested them with a small pilot sample of 125 people. We then checked the inter-item correlations between the questions within the battery and subsequently performed a factor analysis to confirm that they were, in fact, distinct. The results of our statistical tests indicated that these batteries represent distinct underlying factor structures. We then performed a Cronbach's Alpha test for the fidelity of the scales in the battery to gauge its general reliability. All tests demonstrated that the respective scales displayed coefficients well above the range of acceptability — minority economic development (.84) and child and youth policies battery (.94). Assured of the reliability of the batteries as independent scales, we collapsed the questions into index variables that were subsequently used as outcome measures in the statistical analyses that follow. In addition, for ease of interpretation, these variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

FINDINGS

The overall goal of this experimental research is to measure treatment effects associated with exposure to visual communications. Treatment effects are defined here in terms of differences in mean scores between the control condition and the experimental treatments. To estimate the treatment effects of the visuals identified in this survey, we used a series of generalized linear regression models. Regression analysis is a useful technique because it measures the strength of the relationship between multiple variables of interest simultaneously. In addition, a number of control variables were added to the regression models (including race, gender, class, party affiliation, age, education, region of residency, religious affiliation and marital status) to increase the precision of the effect measurements.

Measuring the Strength of the Visual Frame Effects on Policy Support

In this study we report the unstandardized regression coefficients (and their standard errors) of a model that compares exposure to each of the treatment conditions compared to the control condition (in which study participants received no visual stimulus). We begin our analysis by examining the impact of exposure to visual communications on support for economic development in minority communities.

Table 1. Race Frame Effects – Minority Economic Development Policy	
Summary of Main Effects	
Treatments	**Control Group**
Photo Treatments	-.026 (014)
Black Photo Treatments	-.028 (015)*
White Photo Treatments	-.030 (.018)*
Summary of Race Effects Across Discrete Photo Treatments	
Treatments	**Control Group**
Black Thematic Photo	-.030 (.015)**
White Thematic Photo	.000 (.016)
Black Episodic Photo	.000 (.015)
White Episodic Photo	-.034 (.016)**
Statistically Significant Differences *** $p \leq .001$; **$p < .05$; *$p < .10$	
Note 1: Standard errors are indicated in parentheses. **Note 2:** Several controls were included (age, race, party, marital status, religious observance, income, region of residence, and news attentiveness). **Note 3:** Blocked cells are redundant.	

In Table 1 the results indicate that exposure to either a photo that features blacks or a photo that features whites lowers support for minority economic development. This finding runs counter to expectations in a few ways. First, the conventional wisdom would predict that exposure to "positive" pictures of Blacks would lead to higher levels of support for race-based policy; or, at the very least, not a negative effect. Likewise, we wouldn't necessarily expect exposure to white depictions to lower support for minority economic development. If anything, we might expect the null result — that is, no difference in frame effects between the treatment and the control. Nonetheless we see that exposure to a photo featuring whites also lowers support for minority economic development.

The bottom panel of Table 1 disaggregates the photo treatments by race of the subjects and whether the depiction was episodic (i.e., a mother and child) or thematic (i.e., people working in a community garden). These data suggest some intriguing results. For example, it appears that exposure to the black thematic and white episodic treatments drive down support for minority economic development when compared to the control. On the other hand, exposure to the black episodic or white thematic treatments has no frame effects on policy support.

Table 2. Race Frame Effects – Child and Youth Policy	
Summary of Main Effects	
Treatments	**Control Group**
Photo Treatments	-.013 (014)
Black Photo Treatments	-.004 (.015)
White Photo Treatments	-.024 (.016)
Summary of Race Effects Across Discrete Photo Treatments	
Treatments	**Control Group**
Black Thematic Photo	-.002 (.015)
White Thematic Photo	.005 (.015)
Black Episodic Photo	.006 (.015)
White Episodic Photo	-.028 (.015)*
Statistically Significant Differences *** $p \leq .001$; **$p < .05$; *$p < .10$ **Note 1:** Standard errors are indicated in parentheses. **Note 2:** Several controls were included (age, race, party, marital status, religious observance, income, region of residence, and news attentiveness). **Note 3:** Blocked cells are redundant.	

The results in Table 2 where we evaluate the effects on child and youth policies demonstrate essentially the same pattern. Although the evidence is a bit weaker, the episodic/thematic distinction accounts for most of the frame effects. For instance, exposure to the white episodic

photo is associated with a 3-point decrease in support for child and youth policies. Although the photo is episodic (which we might expect to drive down policy support), we might expect the depiction of a mother and child to prime support for policies related to children and youth. Instead, however, the effect is in the opposite direction, showing even less support than from those who were not primed with a photo. Likewise, exposure to the black thematic photo also decreases policy support (although the coefficient did not achieve statistical significance). Again, this is not what the literature would predict.

The most important implication of these findings is that exposure to race-based photos, even relatively positive or benign ones, does not increase public support for policies related to minority economic development or improving conditions for children and youth. Instead, our analysis shows that: (1) there is a statistically significant decrease of about 3 points on policy support when a white episodic visual is presented; (2) exposure to the black photo treatments had either no effects or weak negative effects on policy support. These results might lead one to speculate that, when creating communications strategies designed to heighten policy support on issues such as minority economic development and child and youth policies, it may be better to exclude race-based visuals.
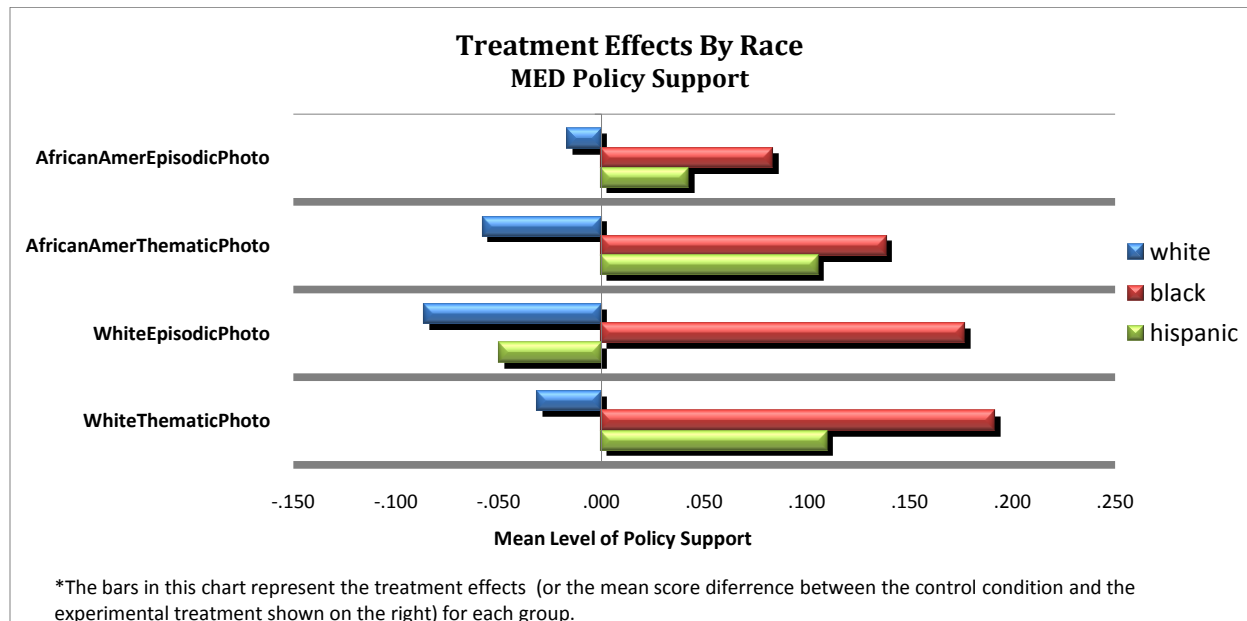
Before reaching this conclusion, however, we must take into account the notion that these counterintuitive results might be a function of the interaction between treatment effects and study participants' prior beliefs and predispositions.

Measuring the Strength of Prior Beliefs and Predispositions on the Visual Frame Effects

As mentioned previously, the research literature on frame effects posits that cues in the incoming communications stream may interact with people's predispositions. In previous Frameworks studies, we have discovered that frame effects are indeed attenuated by long-standing beliefs associated with things such as one's racial or gender affiliation, and partisan identification.[20] To test for these effects, we now examine the interplay between the visual stimuli and people's prior beliefs.

There are several ways to present these data. We have opted for a graphic display that allows for comparison between experimental conditions. The data are shown as bar graphs representing the difference in coefficient sizes between the treatment effects and the control conditions taking into account moderating factors. In Figure 1, for instance, the graphs are the difference in mean minority economic development policy support scores between whites/blacks/Hispanics in the control condition and those in the treatment conditions (accounting for the two different visual presentations — episodic and thematic. These data allow us to better interpret the data from the main effects tests.

Figure 1. Treatment Effects by Race – Minority Economic Development Policy Support

Treatment Effects By Race
MED Policy Support

Legend: white, black, hispanic

Categories: AfricanAmerEpisodicPhoto, AfricanAmerThematicPhoto, WhiteEpisodicPhoto, WhiteThematicPhoto

X-axis: -.150, -.100, -.050, .000, .050, .100, .150, .200, .250

Mean Level of Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score diferrence between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group.
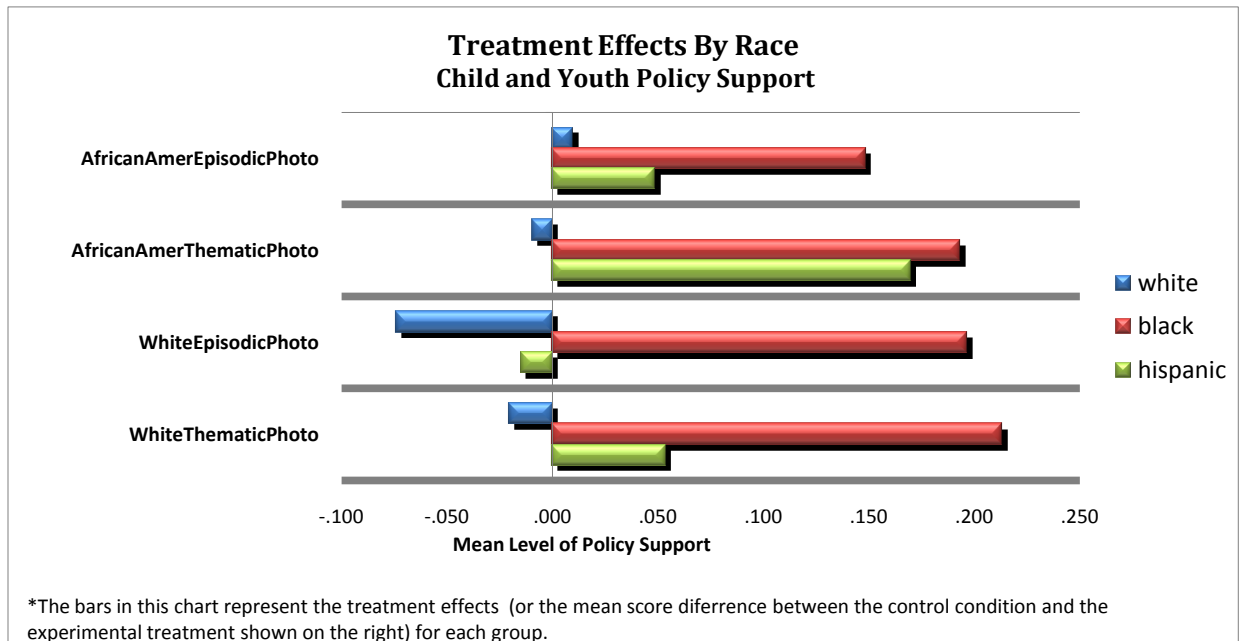
Essentially what we have is a pattern of countervailing effects. In the case of the black thematic condition, we see that whites react quite differently from blacks and Hispanics. When exposed to this treatment, minority subjects become much more supportive of minority economic development than their counterparts in the control condition. While the effect of the black thematic treatment is almost twice as large for blacks as it is for whites, for example, the larger number of whites in the sample produces the negative coefficient reported in the main effects analysis. Similarly, the white episodic condition leads whites to be less supportive of minority economic development than whites in the control condition. The size of the white subsample coupled with the negative effect for Hispanics (i.e., people in the treatment condition are less supportive than people in the control) results in a negative coefficient for the white episodic condition in the main effects analysis. These data also allow us to better understand the null effects for the black episodic and the white thematic conditions. The polarizing effects of the treatment across racial groups are in roughly equal proportions when sample sizes are taken into account. In both cases, blacks and Hispanics react very favorably to the treatments while whites appear generally unaffected by exposure to these types of visual representations. This finding resonates with previous FrameWorks research on communicating about race-based policies where we found differential frame effects across racial groups. [21]

In terms of the impact on child and youth policy support, we see the same basic pattern (Figure 2). Blacks and Hispanics in the black thematic condition are much more supportive than in the control condition. Whites, on the other hand, are not significantly influenced by the treatment. This certainly contributes to the insignificant coefficient reported in the main effects analysis. With regards to the other two treatment categories, we see the same canceling-out dynamic as
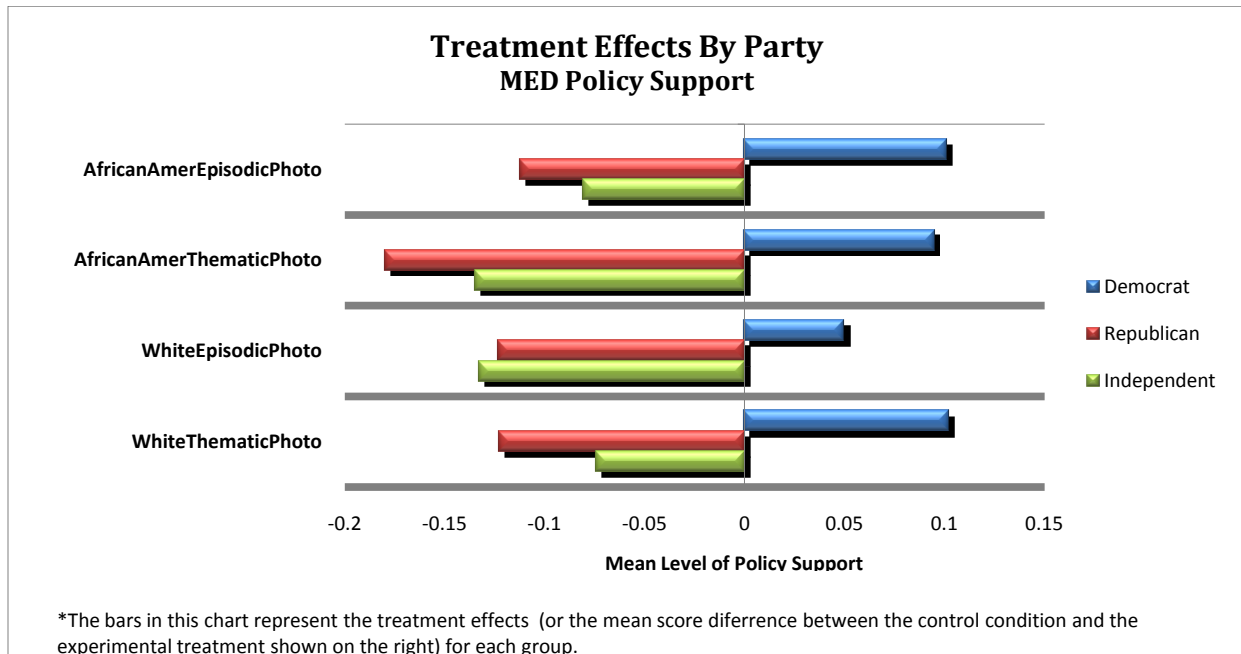
with the minority economic development data.

Figure 2. Treatment Effects by Race – Child and Youth Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score diferrence between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group.

A close examination of the treatment effects for partisan identification in Figure 3 shows essentially the same pattern as reported for race. Exposure to the black thematic and white episodic treatments significantly reduces support for minority economic development among Republicans and Independents compared to the control condition (although it is interesting that Independents are slightly more influenced than Republicans). For Democrats, however, exposure to these stimuli has the opposite effect — it increases support relative to the control condition. The size of the effect is not as great, however, as is the (negative) size of the effect for Republicans and Independents. This then contributes to the negative coefficient found in the main effects analysis.

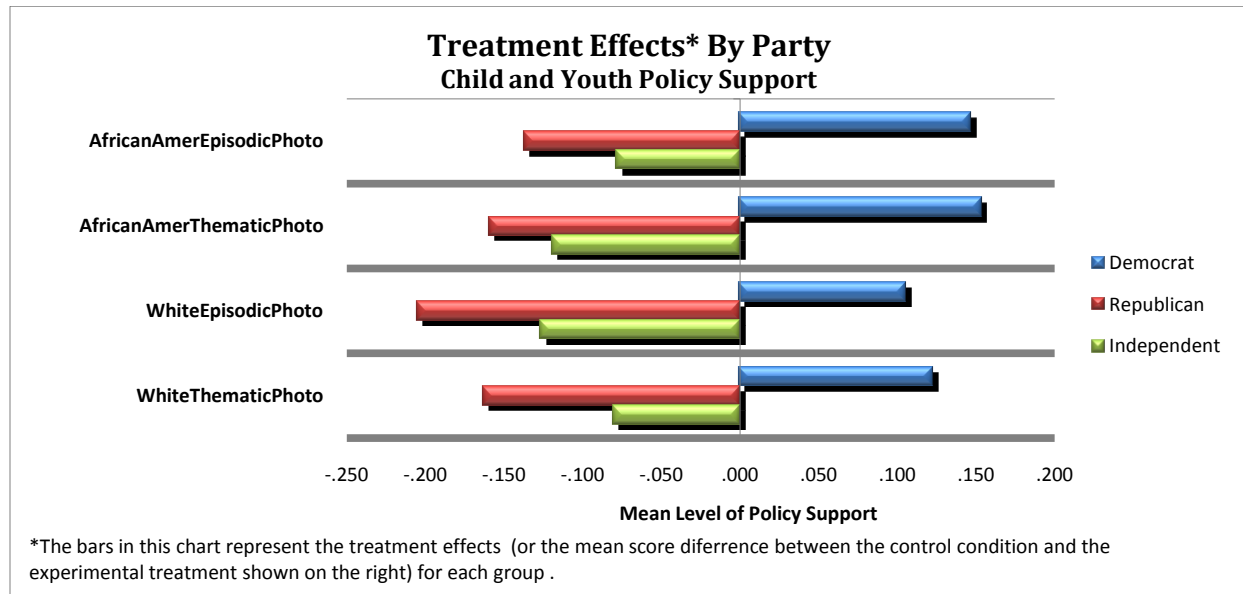The findings for the black episodic and white thematic conditions hold true to form for this analysis. Exposure to the black episodic and white thematic treatments polarizes people along party lines in roughly equal proportions controlling for subsample population sizes. In other words, the null results reported in the main analysis are once again likely the product of a "cancelling-out" effect.

Figure 3. Treatment Effects by Party – Minority Economic Development Policy Support

Treatment Effects By Party
MED Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score diferrence between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group.

We next examine the impact of race-based visual cues on policy support for child and youth policies as moderated by party affiliation. In Figure 4, as in the preceding analysis, the bars represent the treatment effects or the mean score differences between the treatment and control conditions listed. Figure 4 shows that compared to the control group (represented in the figure as the 0 on the indicator line), exposure to any of the photo treatments polarizes policy support for child and youth policies across party lines. That is, Democratic support for child and youth policies increased after exposure while the support of Republicans and Independents moved in the opposite direction. Moreover, because Figure 4 presents within group estimates, we know more specifically that Democrats in the treatment groups were more likely than Democrats in the control to support child and youth policies. Similarly, Republicans and Independents in the treatments were less likely than Republicans and Independents in the control group to support child and youth policies.
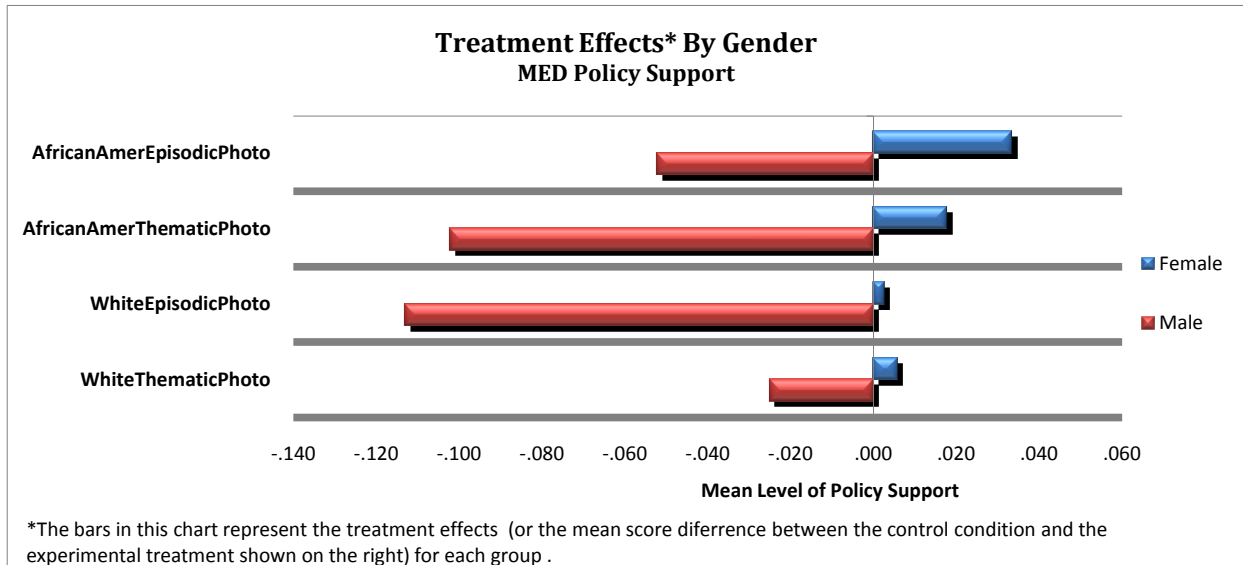
Figure 4. Treatment Effects by Party – Child and Youth Policy Support

Treatment Effects* By Party
Child and Youth Policy Support

Legend: ■ Democrat ■ Republican ■ Independent

Categories (top to bottom): AfricanAmerEpisodicPhoto, AfricanAmerThematicPhoto, WhiteEpisodicPhoto, WhiteThematicPhoto

X-axis: -.250 -.200 -.150 -.100 -.050 .000 .050 .100 .150 .200
Mean Level of Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score diferrence between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group .

Figures 5 and 6 show that, for both minority economic development and child and youth policies, the treatments produced dramatically polarized responses across gender. Overall, men in the treatment conditions tended to have much stronger negative reactions to policy proposals than their counterparts in the control conditions. Women exhibited a similar pattern — they expressed a much stronger positive reaction to the policy proposals once exposed to the treatments but their policy support moved in the opposite, more positive direction. These gendered responses to the visuals treatments held true across both child and youth policies and minority economic development policies.
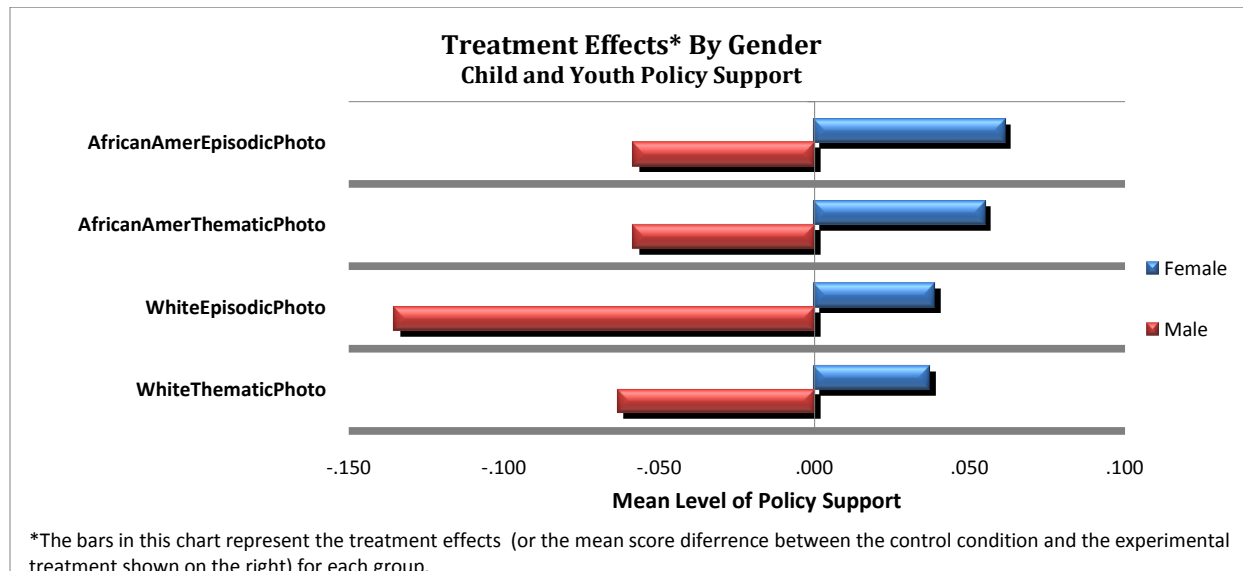
Similar to the party and race effects, the strongest gendered reaction came in exposure to the white episodic photo treatment. Exposure to this treatment moved men in particularly negative directions overall, but on minority economic development policy the white episodic photo treatment received so little support from women that the overall impact of the treatment is largely negative. That is, the polarization effects are narrowed by women's lukewarm reaction to the photo of the white woman and her son — which helped to generate an overall negative coefficient on this treatment, as reported in Table 1.

Figure 5. Treatment Effects by Gender – Minority Economic Development Policy Support

Treatment Effects* By Gender
MED Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score diferrence between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group .

More generally, Figures 5 and 6 show that the polarization effects on minority economic development are less dramatic than for child and youth policies but nonetheless noteworthy. Women typically hold more favorable viewpoints about the efficacy of policies related to child development, and exposure to the treatments tended to strengthen their predispositions about these policies. In contrast, women's support for minority economic development has been shown to be generally positive but not as strong as for policies related to child development, and their exposure to the treatments only marginally strengthened that support (when compared to the control).
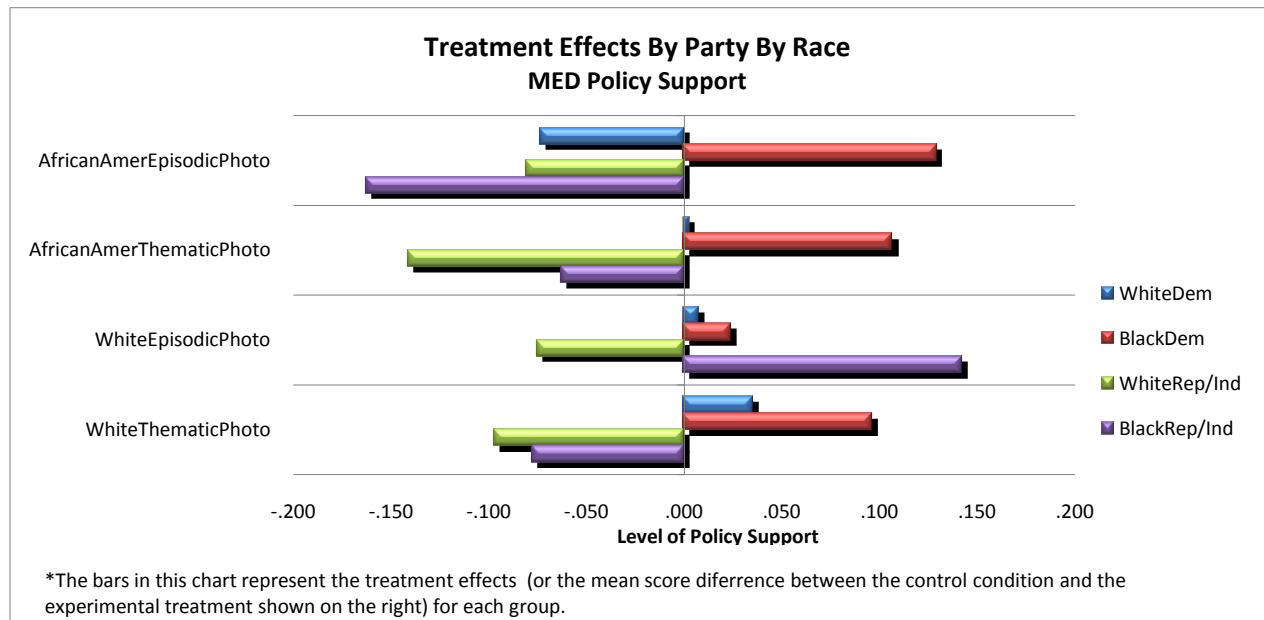
Figure 6. Treatment Effects by Gender – Child and Youth Policy Support

Treatment Effects* By Gender
Child and Youth Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score diferrence between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group.

Before offering an interpretation of the results presented above, we perform one final analysis. Here we take a more complex view of the attenuating effects of prior beliefs. This analysis recognizes that people hold multiple identities that may influence their policy judgments. To account for this fact, we isolate the independent influence of multiple factors simultaneously. This approach is often referred to as the intersectionality argument.[22] The basic idea is that one's defining identity may occur at the intersection of multiple identities. So, for example, it is not simply being a woman that contributes to one's worldview, but rather it is being an black woman that gives rise to a particular understanding of the world.

We test for intersectionality effects by examining treatment effects across racial lines, independently taking into account political party and gender. In Figure 7 we display the results for the impact of treatment effects on minority economic development policy support, accounting for both race and party.

Figure 7. Treatment Effects by Party by Race – Minority Economic Development Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score difference between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group.

This analysis reveals several interesting findings. First, we see that the impact of exposure to the black thematic condition has a profound effect on white and black Republicans and Independents — they are much less supportive of economic development policy in minority communities than their counterparts in the control. While black Democrats responded to this treatment with higher levels of policy support, white Democrats in the treatment condition did not respond in this manner compared to their counterparts in the control. Moreover, Republicans and Independents (of all racial groups) had a stronger negative reaction to the black thematic visual treatment as indicated by their substantially lower levels of policy support.

With regards to the common finding that the black thematic condition polarizes both race and partisanship, we see that Republicans and Independents (regardless of race) respond negatively to the treatment (compared to the control). In contrast, Democrats (regardless of race) respond in a supportive direction (compared to the control). Exposure to the white thematic visual produces differential levels of policy support across party and race. Black Republicans and Independents break from their traditional pattern and actually exhibit higher levels of policy support compared to the control condition. Finally, and a bit surprisingly, white Democrats respond negatively to the black episodic treatment in terms of policy support for minority economic development (compared to the control). While this is what we might expect (race trumps party) it has generally not been the pattern in these data.

Figure 8. Treatment Effects by Party by Race – Child and Youth Policy Support
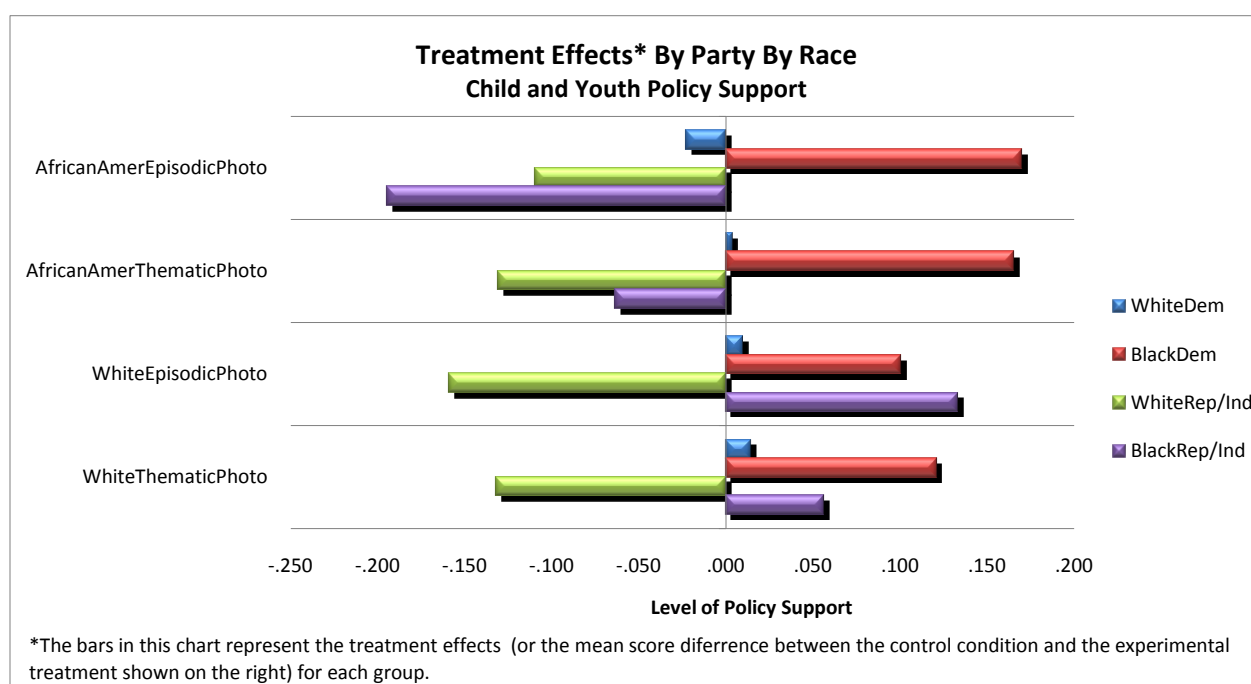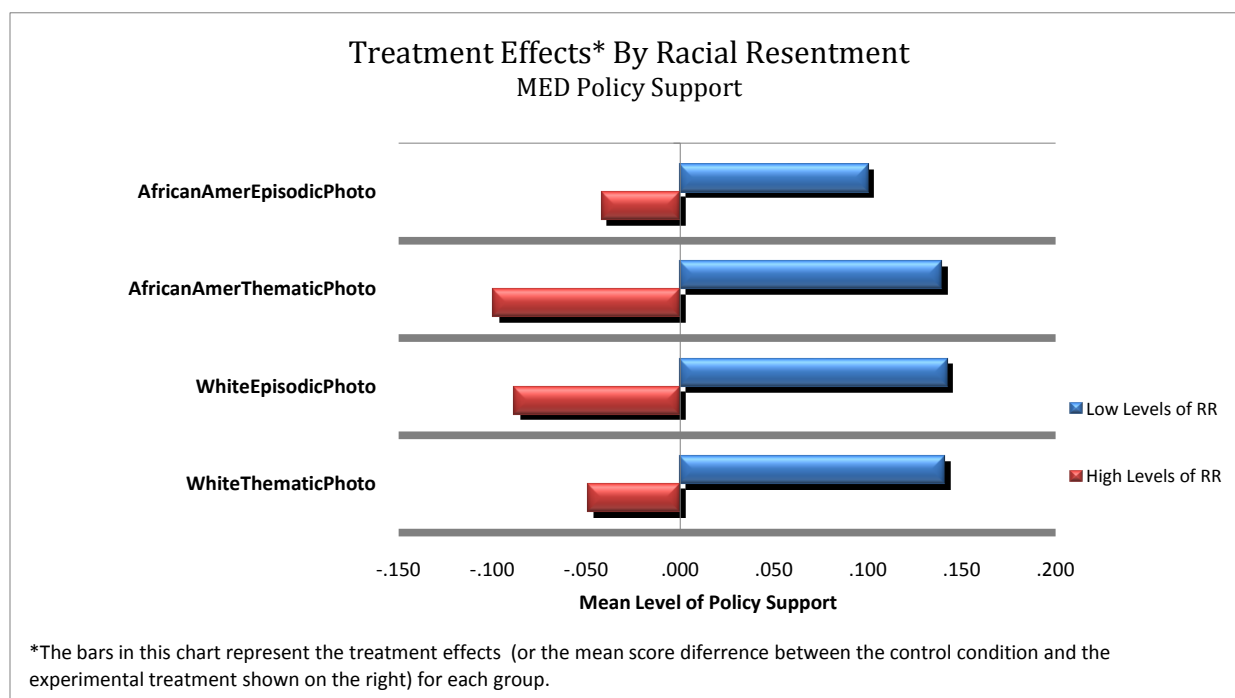

The results for child and youth policy generally conform to the pattern just reported (Figure 8). Exposure to visual treatments polarizes study participants along racial and party lines. More notably, exposure to the black thematic treatment polarizes along party lines regardless of race, while exposure to the white episodic condition polarizes on both party and race dimensions — white Republicans and Independents exhibit lower levels of policy support whereas black and white Democrats, as well as black republicans and Independents, display higher levels of policy support.

We were also interested in how existing levels of racial resentment might interact with exposure to the visual treatments in determining support for both child and youth and minority economic development policies. Based on the concept of racial resentment[23], we would hypothesize that

those with higher levels of racial resentment would be less supportive of race-explicit policies (the MED battery), and that exposure to race-explicit visuals would intensify this outcome. The primary assumption of racial resentment in the literature is that whites' lack of support for race-based policies are a function of their resentment over what they perceive to be preferential treatment by the government or systems toward minorities and, further, that this is a violation of core American values of individual responsibility.[24] To analyze this issue we used a set of questions routinely used in the social sciences to capture racial resentment (which can be found in Appendix C) and found clear relationships between levels of racial resentment and the pattern of policy support following treatment. These patterns are shown in Figures 9 and 10.

Figure 9. Treatment Effects by Racial Resentment – Minority Economic Development Policy Support

Treatment Effects* By Racial Resentment
MED Policy Support

*The bars in this chart represent the treatment effects (or the mean score diferrence between the control condition and the experimental treatment shown on the right) for each group.

Both Figures 9 and 10 indicate a strong interaction between the level of racial resentment, exposure to visuals, and policy support. For those high in racial resentment, exposure to any of the visuals drove down support for policy, when compared to the control; for those low in racial resentment, exposure to any of the visuals increased support for policy, when compared to the control. This was more pronounced in the minority economic development battery, but also true for the child and youth policy battery.

It is understandable that for those with higher levels of racial resentment certain visual treatments might intensify their rejection of race-explicit policies. Although we found effects across photo treatments on support for minority economic development policies, the most pronounced effects were for the black thematic photo and the white episodic photo. We would hypothesize that for those high in racial resentment, who think that systems are unfairly favoring minorities, the thematic photo of blacks would conceptually align with this concern and drive down support for

race-explicit policies.

On the White Episodic photo however, we find dramatic effects for those with higher levels of racial resentment on both race-based and child-focused policy batteries. For those with higher levels of racial resentment, who believe that benefits are being accorded minority populations disproportionately and unfairly, the white mother and child may serve to reinforce their feelings of inequality toward whites, thus driving down support for policy. [25]

Figure 10. Treatment Effects by Racial Resentment – Child and Youth Policy Support
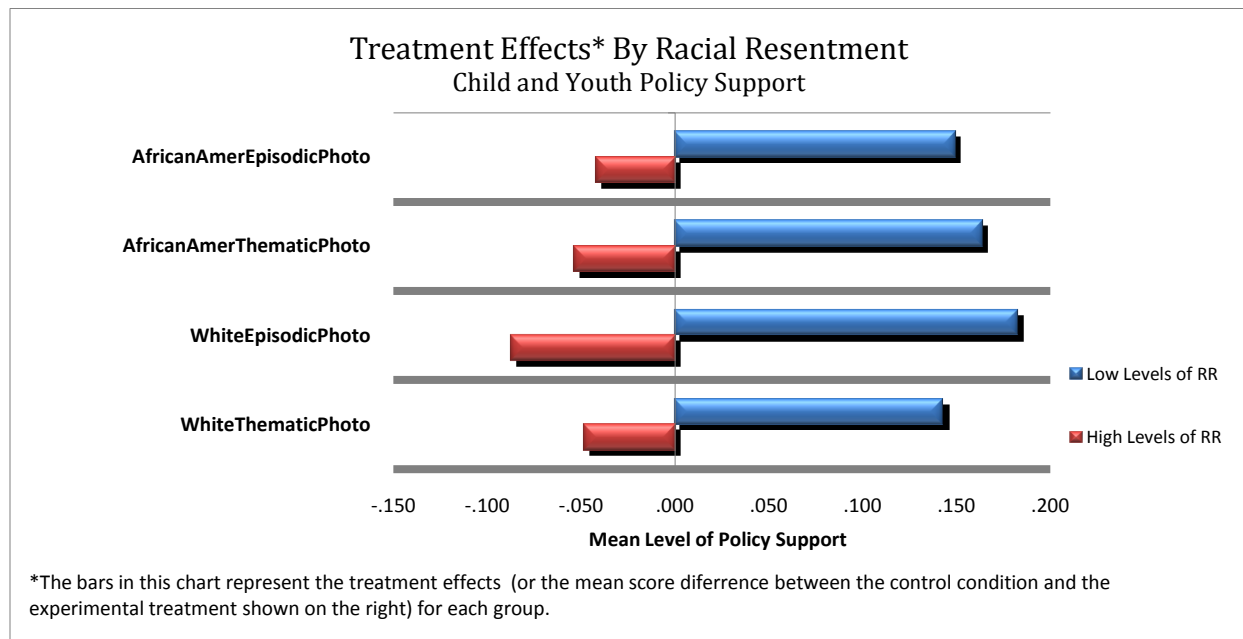

Finally, to conclude our analysis, we evaluate the intersection of race and gender as moderating factors for policy support. Figure 11 demonstrates that gender effects are highly racialized in terms of support for minority economic development policy. The primary evidence on this issue is seen with just a cursory glance at the pattern of the color bars. In every instance but one, blacks and whites are on opposite sides of the graph regardless of gender. Perhaps most telling is the finding that white women are more susceptible to frame effects. For instance, white women report lower levels of support in the black thematic condition compared to the control (and compared to white men). Their levels of policy support are found to be much more affected by exposure to the white thematic photo. To the contrary, there are no gender differences among whites in the white episodic treatment condition.

Figure 11. Treatment Effects by Gender by Race – Minority Economic Development Policy Support
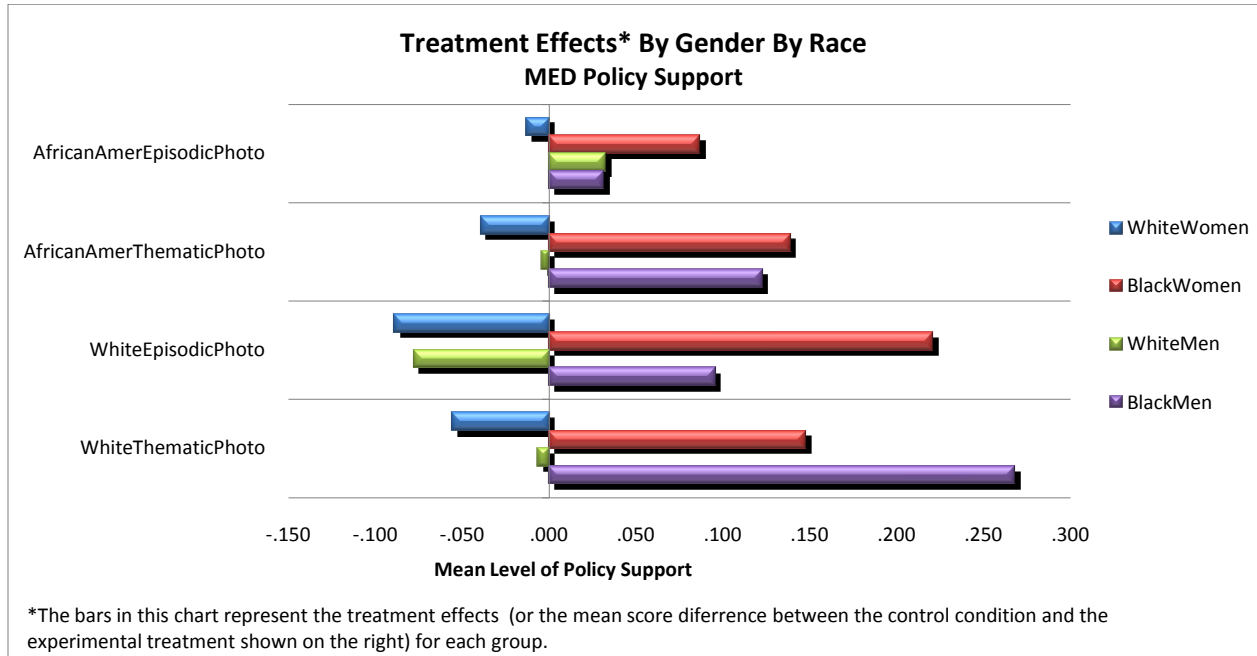
This pattern is repeated in Figure 12, which charts the same analysis for frame effects on child and youth policies, taking into account the joint moderating effects of race and gender.

Figure 12. Treatment Effects by Gender by Race – Child and Youth Policy Support
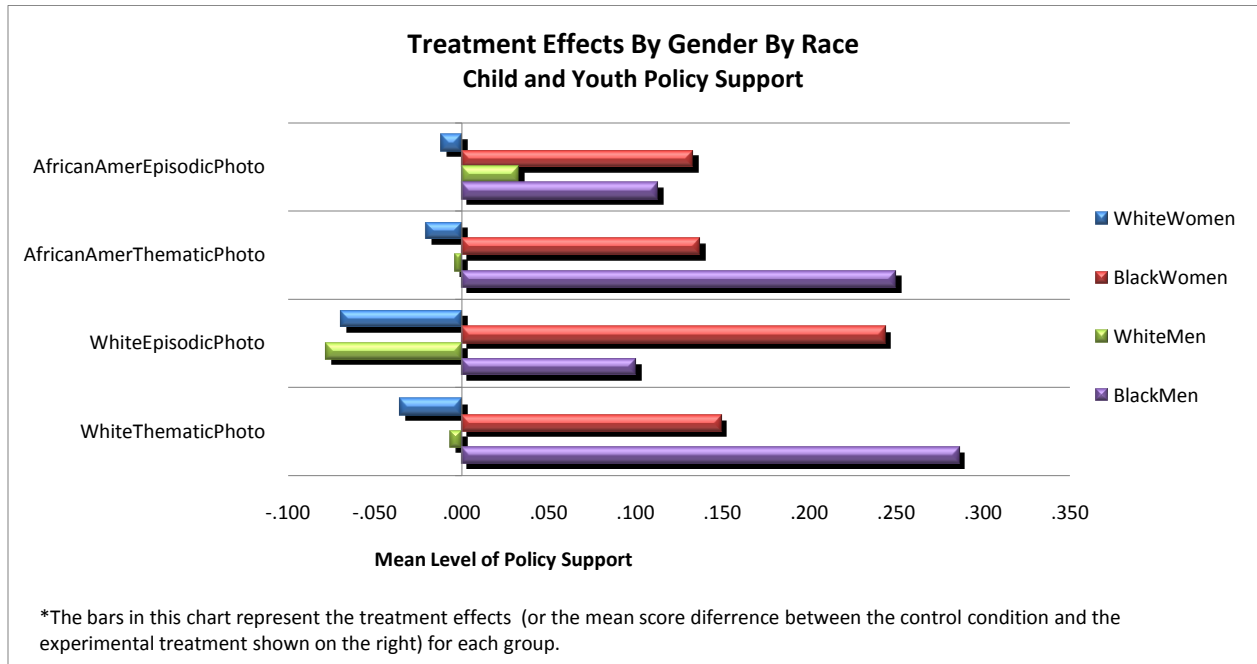
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These results suggest that policy advocates should be extremely cautious about whether and how they incorporate visual cues into communications meant to broaden policy support. We find in the experimental research outlined in this report that policy support is seldom advanced by the presentation of visuals in the frame but, rather that visuals can exact a huge penalty on policy support because of their polarizing impacts across some important groups. More to the point, we report findings in this paper that suggest that visuals can polarize policy support along party, race and gender lines. Furthermore, these attenuating effects on policy support across race, gender and class go deeper, such that we find a basic pattern where party affiliation trumps race in most instances and where race trumps gender.

More specifically, the main effects of the visual treatments discussed in this analysis show weak but consistent results – exposure to the white episodic and black thematic conditions lowers support for both minority economic development and child and youth policies. The relatively tepid effects on policy support overall, we conjecture, are the result of the attenuating presence of prior beliefs, which is why we also demonstrate the influence of prior beliefs (based on racial resentment, race, gender and party identification) on support for policy. In doing so, we find a fairly robust pattern of polarization effects that serve to move people in opposite directions across these dimensions but, in so doing, to propel them more dramatically in those directions. The impact of the treatments then, when analyzed independent of race, party, gender (strong prior beliefs), was essentially to "wash each other out" or to negate the overall effect of the treatment on support for policy. Perhaps most interesting of all, we find this pattern was not policy domain specific. That is, we found this effect on both the race-specific and the child-focused policy batteries alike.

What accounts for these patterns – especially those related to effects we found for the black thematic and white episodic photo treatments? We can offer a few speculative hypotheses. With regard to the black thematic treatment, it may simply be the case that white survey respondents were not sure what to make of the black thematic treatment, so they defaulted to general anti-black predispositions. Without additional information in the frame to structure how respondents should interpret the photo (Values, Models, Context, etc.), the relationship among the photo subjects, and why they ended up on the cover of Newsweek (as was indicated in the survey setup), our survey respondents were without sufficient individuating information for them to make alternative judgments. Finally, on the black thematic treatment, whites may simply have perceived the visual as conforming to a self-help narrative which articulates the position that blacks should be taking care of their own communities' needs and enabling their own economic development.

Our findings around the white episodic treatment give pause for reflection as well and suggest to us that race still matters, matters a great deal, and that advocates should be especially careful

when communicating about it. In particular, the fact that policy support following exposure to the white episodic photo (which depicted a white mother and child) was associated with substantial negative assessments of child and youth policy support *by whites* and not by blacks or Hispanics, means that advocates need to give extra thought to these sorts of presentations. We argue that this result is likely the result of the white mother being read in very gendered ways such that she may have been perceived as a single mother asking for a handout. And, she is seen that way even by white women who responded to our survey – as they too showed significantly decreased policy support after being exposed to her picture. She might have simply violated the norm of individual responsibility. This finding has particular cautionary consequences for advocates of women's issues who have long thought that explaining the need for policies that advance women and families was best accomplished by "putting a human face on the problem".

Although our findings are cautionary, they do not suggest that visuals should necessarily be avoided. We speculate that appropriate visuals combined with other strategically coordinated frame elements like Values and Simplifying Models would help to advance support for policies in these areas. Values would help by redirecting the vantage point from which people reason both about the visuals they are seeing and the policy issues they are asked to evaluate. Simplifying Models have been shown to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of complex social problems, and so offer new information with which people can reason when evaluating policy solutions. Without either of these or other essential frame elements[26] to accompany the visuals, "putting a face on the issue," as advocates have often been advised to do, gets no additional traction on the issue because respondents are likely to stay in their own political, gender, racial "camps." Moreover, after exposure to such photos, their viewpoints are also likely to become more entrenched. The bottom line is that the visuals, in the absence of fuller frame choreography (i.e., values, models, solutions, context, etc), may produce results counterproductive to advocates' and experts' goals for social change. The pictures may indeed tell a story but, without the redirective power of additional frame elements, it may not be the one that advocates for progressive social policies wished to tell.

APPENDIX A: EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENTS

1. African American Episodic Photo. This photo appeared on the cover of Newsweek in the fall of last year. Did you see it or read the article that was associated with it?

2. African American Thematic Photo. This photo appeared on the cover of Newsweek in the fall of last year. Did you see it or read the article that was associated with it?

3. White Episodic Photo. This photo appeared on the cover of Newsweek in the fall of last year. Did you see it or read the article that was associated with it?

4. White Thematic Photo. This photo appeared on the cover of Newsweek in the fall of last year. Did you see it or read the article that was associated with it?

<div align="center">APPENDIX B: POLICY BATTERIES</div>

Minority Economic Development

1. Create tax incentives for businesses in low-income minority communities.

2. Expand the earned income tax credit, which results in more income for low-wage minority workers.

3. For those minorities transitioning from welfare to work, provide supplementary benefits like child care and health care, until their wages are above the poverty level.

4. Provide low-cost loans for minorities who are buying their first home.

Child and Youth policies

1. Develop and fund programs that create a transition into school for poor children ages three to six.

2. Make high-quality early care and education programs more broadly available and affordable for lower-income families through subsidies and sliding fee scales.

3. Increase K-12 school funding to rural school districts so that children in rural areas are provided with quality educational environments comparable to those children have in more densely populated areas.

4. Provide more fresh fruits and vegetables to schools by expanding federal fresh fruit and vegetable programs as well as by working through commodity food programs.

5. Fund community-based programs that encourage youth in low-income neighborhoods to serve as community leaders and social change agents.

6. Increase funding for initiatives at colleges and universities that increase opportunities for minority students to enter and complete their college degrees.

7. The Child Nutrition Act should be revised so that it updates and improves nutrition standards for schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

APPENDIX C: RACIAL RESENTMENT BATTERY[27]

1. The Irish, Italians, Jews and many other groups overcame prejudice and worked their way up. African Americans should do the same without any special favors.

2. Generations of discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for African Americans to work their way out of the lower class.

3. It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if African Americans would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

4. Over the past few years, African Americans have gotten less than they deserve.

5. Most African Americans who receive money from welfare programs could get along without it if they tried.

6. Government officials usually pay less attention to a request or complaint from an African American person than from a white person.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit research organization founded in 1999 to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. It has become known for its development of Strategic Frame Analysis ™, which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with scientists and social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential strategies for advancing public understanding of remedial policies. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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[17] We specifically made use of the national Web-based surveys conducted by YouGov Polimetrix. YouGov Polimetrix requires its two million panelists to participate in weekly studies in exchange for free Internet access. To match those participants to our survey, a two-stage sampling procedure is utilized that creates a "matched" sample. That is, first a conventional random sample is drawn, and Polimetrix subsequently mirrors the conventional sample by selecting panelists who most closely resemble each member of the random sample.

[18] FrameWorks researcher commissioned a photo shoot with a set of actors in the Baltimore, Md., area. Those actors were specifically chosen because they looked to be about the same ages and body builds, with no particularly distinguishing marks or attributes. Photographers were careful to ensure that the pictures taken of the actors were virtually identical to better facilitate real comparison based on race. The actual pictures used can be found in Appendix A.

[19] A combination of early child and youth policies was developed by FrameWorks to approximate the range of policies reflected by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's current mission and programs. These policies were reviewed by the FrameWorks research staff to ensure their more general applicability to policies proposed by child and youth advocates more broadly.

[20] See for example: (1) Manuel, T. & Gilliam, F. (2009). *Advancing support for early child mental health policies: Early results from Strategic Frame Analysis™ experimental research.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. (2) Gilliam, F. (2007). *Telling the science story: An exploration of frame effects on public understanding and support for early child development*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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[25] The idea here is that there is a public association between poverty and the need for government assistance as a black phenomenon. If the white woman in this picture is perceived as being needy in the same way that blacks (en masse) are perceived and especially if she is seen as a single mother – respondents may have felt less sympathetic to her and thus, responded to the policy batteries from that vantage point.

[26] For more details delineation of other elements of the frame, visit FrameWorks' website (www.FrameWorksInstitute.org) and under "Products and Tools", the *Framing Essentials* section has an entire series dedicated to enumerating those.

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27 The racial resentment scale is widely used as a measure of racial attitudes in the social science literature. See, for example, David O. Sears and P.J. Henry, (2005) "Over Thirty Years Later: A Contemporary Look at Symbolic Racism," Advances in Experimental Psychology, (37) 95-149.